DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 248 505 CS 208 364

AUTHOR Rodrigues, Dawn
TITLE Sounding the Depths: Computers and Basic Writers.
PUB DATE Mar 84
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (35th, New York, NY, March 29-31, 1984).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cognitive Style; *Computer Assisted Instruction; *Course Content; Higher Education; *Integrated Activities; Microcomputers; Student Needs; Student Reaction; *Word Processing; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS *Basic Writing

ABSTRACT

Since basic writers tend to learn best when only a few skills are presented at a time, composition teachers should introduce these students to word processing and writing simultaneously, demonstrating word processing commands as they complement the writing process. For instance, the use of the insert key can be presented when students need to revise by adding detail, or, the function of the delete key can be explained when students find digressions in their writing. The pedagogical approach may be organized around a series of writing cycles, each of which moves the students through discrete stages of the writing process. During the first class session of each new writing cycle, students meet in the regular classroom to select a personal journal entry to use as the basis for a theme. The second class, held in the computer lab, teaches students new word processing skills. In class three, students edit one another's papers at the computer, and in class four students submit their completed papers. Students who have been introduced to word processing in this way have expressed enthusiasm for the course. They learned how to sequence their revisions and concentrate on content and structure before moving to style and mechanical matters. The computer also helped the students to concentrate on their work and to become independent writers. (HOD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Dawn Rodrigues

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED248505

Sounding the Depths: Computers and Basic Writers

by Dawn Rodrigues

Paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, New York, March 1984

CS208364

Sounding the Depths: Computers and Basic Writers

As English teachers, we choose from a wide array of teaching strategies those best suited, in our opinions, for our students' needs. When teaching strategies have been well-tested, choosing one teaching technique over another is often a matter a finding methods which match our teaching styles and our students' learning styles. However, when the technique is still controversial--as teaching writing as a process was in its early days and as teaching writing with computers is now--we need to deliberate longer. As computers begin to appear in composition classrooms, we need to think carefully and critically about their use. With basic writers in particular, we should take our time and experiment with computers on a limited basis before making major changes in our teaching.

Because basic writers come to us apprehensive about writing and insecure about their ability to learn how to write, we are justifiably cautious about any additions to an already crowded course. If word processing should interfere with the students' progress in our courses, we will want no part of it. On the other hand, if we find that basic writers have no difficulty learning keyboard commands and writing skills simultaneously, we will want to press on, experimenting with a variety of teaching techniques so that we have the capabilities as teachers to respond to our students' varying needs as learners, providing them with every possible opportunity to succeed.

We can learn from the struggles of the past as we attempt to teach computer writing effectively. In a 1976 article entitled "Diving In: An Introduction to Basic Writing," Mina Shaughnessy identified the stages novice basic writing teachers went through as they learned how to teach effectively.[1] In this paper, I will relate our present situation--as prospective computer writing teachers to those previous experiences of basic writing teachers. Then, I will discuss some concerns we might have as we prepare ourselves for teaching basic writing with computers. Finally, I will present my own and my students' experience with computers in the basic writing classroom.

CONNECTIONS WITH BASIC WRITING PEDAGOGY

In "Diving In," Mina Shaughnessy stresses the relationship between quality teaching and student success. Only when basic writing teachers learn how to teach basic writing effectively do students show dramatic progress in remedial courses. Teachers themselves discover effective teaching techniques as they move through discrete stages.

In the first stage, **Guarding the Tower,** basic writing teachers feel that their students can't do it--they can't possibly learn how to write acceptably at the university. In the second stage, **Converting the Natives,** novice basic writing teachers find that many of their students can indeed learn how to write; nonetheless, teachers continue to employ the same techniques they have always used, expecting students to learn writing in the same way as traditional students learned. When they discover that their students learn more if teaching

strategies are tailored to the special needs of their students, teachers are ready to move to stage three, **Sounding the Depths.** At this stage, teachers begin observing students' writing behavior, experimenting with techniques and finding those best-suited for basic writers. Finally, basic writing teachers reach stage four, **Diving In;** at this point, they have learned how to present composition to their students successfully, but they know that they need to continue experimenting, teaching in different ways different semesters, depending on the students in a given class.

As many basic writing teachers reached stage three and four, a distinct pedagogy for teaching basic writing emerged. Following Shaughnessy's lead, teacher-researchers like Andrea Lunsford,[2] David Bartholomae,[3] and Mike Rose[4] codified and reinforced many of Shaughnessy's hypotheses. With much knowledge of basic writers to draw on, but little knowledge of how basic writers will respond to computers, we may need to go through similar stages as we learn how to teach writing with computers.

Just as beginning basic writing teachers "guarded the tower," computer-writing teachers may also have a tendency to shield their students from learning, in this case believing in all honesty that word processing is too difficult for their students to master. These teachers may "guard the tower" zealously, never getting to stage two, **Converting the Natives.** If they do get to this stage, teachers may at first try to teach word processing in a way similar to the way it was taught to them. When they realize that teaching strategies need to be

adapted to basic writers' special needs, teachers will have reached stage three, **Sounding the Depths**, the experimental stage which should last the longest. By proceeding carefully, we may find appropriate teaching techniques, ones that don't interfere with students' learning to write. If many basic writing teachers share their experiences in teaching basic writers with computers, we will be ready to "dive in," confident that students will benefit from the new pedagogy teachers developed together.

PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

Even though we may be determined to allow our students access to computers, there are, nonetheless, some questions we need to answer before using computers with an entire section of basic writing students: first, we wonder whether our students can learn word processing skills and, next, we wonder whether we can incorporate these skills into our curriculum in a way which recognizes the special needs of basic writers.

We have reason to wonder whether learning word processing and writing during the same semester may be too demanding for our students. Knowing that Kate Kiefer and Charles Smith have found The Writer's Workbench inappropriate for basic writers could make us cautious.[5] Reading about students in William Marling's [6] and Richard Collier's[7] studies who had difficulties mastering keyboard commands could make us skeptical. But learning of Collette Daiute's success in teaching children how to use the word processor should encourage us.[9] Further, the continuing use of word processing by teachers at Bank Street College's elementary school should convince us that we, too,

might be successful in teaching basic writing with computers.

Of course, computers alone will not make us better teachers. We need to find a suitable method for incorporating computers into our classrooms. Just as we learned how to present composition skills differently to basic writers than to traditional students, so we need to develop a separate pedagogy for computer-based basic writing sections. Traditional students may be able to learn word processing by attending several workshops given by computer science departments, but basic writing students need English teachers' help. Because English teachers know that basic writers tend to learn best when only a few new skills are presented at a time, they can adapt their teaching to basic writers' learning styles. By integrating their knowledge of basic writers with their growing knowledge about computers, composition instructors can present word processing and writing simultaneously, demonstrating word processing commands as they complement the writing process. For instance, the use of the insert key can be presented when students need to revise their writing by adding detail. The function of the delete key can be explained when students find digressions in their writing. By teaching keyboard commands which coincide with steps in their writing process, English teachers can keep the focus on writing rather than on computers.

Sounding the Depths: One Approach

As basic writing teachers, we have a backlog of successful approaches to draw on in our courses. We have learned to individualize grammar instruction through error-analysis. We

have learned how to help reduce students' writing apprehension by beginning the semester with journal exercises and free writing. As we move toward becoming effective teachers of computer-assisted courses, I feel that we shoud incorporate these and other successful teaching strategies. Thus, we don't need to change our syllabi drastically when we first "sound the depths" and incorporate computers into our basic writing courses.

Agreeing with Lewis Meyers that basic writing students need to see an experience as a "quintessently human one,"[9] I designed my syllabus around the learners' needs. I wanted to be sure before I went ahead that my students were interested in writing with computers. I also wanted to be sure that I covered as much of the text as in previous semesters so that my students wouldn't feel that they had lost anything. Therefore, rather than changing the pattern of my syllabus, I merely slowed it down temporarily as I incorporated word processing. The temporarily slower pace of the course at this point in the semester was offset by faster learning of concepts in the middle of the semester. By the end of the semester I had actually taught more than I did in previous years. My students were definitely not cheated.

I began by identifying the tasks involved in word processing and deciding which skills I would teach at different points in the semester, and at different stages of the writing process. I decided to teach word processing and composing side by side, according to the following pattern:

WRITING ASSIGNMENT	COMPUTER SKILLS
narrative	entering text, deleting text inserting text, cursor movement with arrow keys
descriptive	opening a file, naming a file, saving a file, delete word, character, and line commands
expository #1	block moves, printing a file
expository #2	composing and revising on-screen
expository #3	spelling checker

I continued by organizing my syllabus around a series of writing cycles, as I have previously. Within each cycle, students move through discrete stages of the writing process in class. It usually takes four class periods for students to move from free writing to final drafts; with computers, it took three extra days for students to complete their first paper. During these sessions, I opened and closed students' files and printed their papers. Although it was extra work for me, it allowed the students to concentrate on writing, not on learning computer commands. Subsequent papers required only the usual four class periods. The procedure I used during the "word processing-writing cycle" for writing assignment #1 follows:

Class One and Class Two. Students came to class with two journal entries. As in previous semesters, I asked them to choose the one which seemed to have the most promise as the basis for their writing. Then we moved to the computer room. I didn't explain anything at all about computers. I had the disks already booted

up. All the students had to do was sit down and start typing. Because I had twelve students and six computers, students had to work in pairs. The pairing proved useful, though. While one student typed his or her journal entry, the other student reminded the first student of essential procedures: continuing typing rather than pressing return at the end of each line; correcting errors by backspacing and typing over words; using the arrow keys to move to a desired location in the text. By the end of the second class, students had entered their journal entries into the computer. They waited a few minutes after class for me to print their writing.

Class three. Students came to the regular classroom with their printouts. I asked them to write down the main ideas of their journal entries and I proceeded to help them invent ideas for their papers. I told students to complete a rough draft of their paper before the next class period, sheduling time to enter it into the computer during my office hours.

Class Four and Class Five. Students came to class with printouts of their rough drafts. I asked six to move to the computer where I had already made revision suggestions on their drafts. At the computer, the first group of students, following my suggestions, added material, deleted it, formed new sentences. The other six students and I sat around a table where I involved them in peer review of their writing, getting them ready to move to the computer. The only kind of revision we looked for was content or structural revision. Since their narratives were written in

chronological order, rearranging sentences was not necessary; therefore, deleting existing text and inserting changed text was the main skill students needed to learn at the computer. By the end of the first period, I had printed one groups' themes and readied the second group to make changes in their text during the next class.

Class Six and Class Seven. Although the students had revised their themes for organization and development, all needed much work in style and mechanics. I instructed students to work in pairs at the computer, editing one another's work first by looking for better ways to express ideas and then by correcting errors sentence by sentence. Students were expected to make surface editing corrections in class, helping each other determine which sentences needed further revision.

Subsequent writing cycles were organized as follows. During the first class session of each new writing cycle, students met in the regular classroom to select a journal entry to use as the basis for a theme. Working in groups, students helped each other determine a main idea and invent supporting details. Occasionally, the class went to the computer lab to use the computer-assisted invention programs I had available. Class two of each writing cycle was held in the lab. During the first few minutes of this class session, I presented new word processing skills. Students were required to come to class with completed rough drafts. Students worked on reorganizing their drafts, six at computers, six at the table, rotating at mid-point in the period. On some themes, students worked in pairs or triads

directly at the computer. Outside class, students entered their texts into the computer. In class three, students edited one anothers' papers at the computer. In class four, students were required to submit completed papers. Again, we met in the regular classroom, so that I could introduce the next theme and explain key concepts discussed in their textbooks.

STUDENT REACTIONS

Of the twelve students in my class who were trained to write on the word processor, eleven successfully completed the course. Their responses to a questionnaire indicate that they liked the course more than any other English class they had ever taken. They also noted that they planned to continue writing on the word processor after the course was over. To the question "Did you need more instruction in word processing than you received?" eleven out of 12 said "no," but in their comments five of these students indicated that they would like to have learned how to use more word processing commands.

Since I was experimenting with a classroom strategy for incorporating word processing and writing instruction, I did not measure the effects of computers on students' writing quality. But I do know that my students have done at least as well as students in previous classes (eleven out of 12 received an "S" grade). Thus I have not inhibited their development as writers by instructing them on uses of word processing.

As the semester progressed, I observed various ways in which the computer was affecting my students' progress. One of the

first observations I made was that students' attitudes toward writing were changing quickly. Students who indicated that they did not like writing at the beginning of the semester changed their opinions. Whereas 9 out of 11 indicated a dislike for writing at the outset, 11 out of 12 said that they enjoyed writing at the end of the term. From the day I introduced word processing, students responded enthusiastically, often staying an hour after class to work on their writing.

Another way in which the computer seems to have influenced students' attitudes is that it helped reduce their writing apprehension. Students who at the beginning of the semester wrote about being nervous about writing (in early journal entries) showed no anxiety at all as the course progressed. For instance, one student who couldn't even think of an idea for a journal entry on the second day of class blossomed when he began writing on the computer. He wasn't afraid to express himself because he knew that he could immediately delete any sentences which embarrassed him. In general, I found that students' interest in the computer seemed to dissipate their writing apprehension. The computer somehow seemed to make it all more do-able.

The computer also affected my students' behavior as writers. Students learned how to revise much more readily than ever before. They learned how to sequence their revision, concentrating on content and structure before moving to style and mechanical matters. Samples of their peers' drafts--with changes incorporated in stages--demonstrated that the computer could help them to improve their drafts best if they concentrated only on

one level of revision at a time. When students worked in peer editing groups in front of the computer, they could see some results of the revision immediately. Before, students in peer groups could suggest re-organization, but they couldn't do it on the spot.

The computer changed my students' behavior in still another way. The attention spans of the students were similar to those of most other basic writing students at the beginning of the semester. They could concentrate for only short periods of time and wrote very little on in-class journal entries. But by mid-semester, these students were able to focus their attention on their work, often remaining on-task for more than two hours. Computers seem to have helped students to slow down, concentrate, and tackle tasks one at a time. They could focus on the text that appeared on the monitor without being distracted by the other pages already written or the blank paper in front of them. Seeing just a part of their writing at a time may have helped.

Perhaps the most important effect computers have had on basic writing students' behavior is that students seem to have become more independent writers by the end of the semester. When they came to the computer lab earlier in the term, they asked for my help frequently. During the last few weeks of the semester, however, they were eager to proceed alone. After checking their thesis sentences with me, they moved to rough draft and final drafts independently. Because I require them to submit printouts of their work in stages, I can document their improvement. The kinds of changes that students made earlier in the term only at

my suggestion were self-initiated later. For instance, students learned how to revise their structure and organization between drafts; they began to add details and delete parts on their own. And they learned how to do a better job editing their papers. Even if the quality of their finished products is not significantly higher than that of previous years' students, I feel that these students have internalized the writing process and will more likely follow it after the semester ends.

TOWARDS DIVING IN: CONCLUSIONS

On the basis of my experience, I can't say that it is essential that we begin to use computers in basic writing courses now. But in the near future, when other students are learning to write with computers, we may want to incorporate them into our classes, too: because they have become a universally accepted writing tool and because our students enjoy working on them. Rather than wait until the times have changed, I see some value in being prepared. By taking the opportunity to work with students on computers while the enthusiasm runs high, we can find teaching methods which help our students to become more proficient writers.

I am not suggesting that my strategies should be followed by others; I need to do more exploring and discovering myself. Each basic writing instructor should "sound the depths" independently. But I am suggesting that my approach be considered. As long as the teacher integrates computers and writing so as to reduce the burden for the students, the outcome should be positive.

Undeniably, teachers can help basic writers without

computers. But we can't expect computers to help our students unless we teach students how to use the computers throughout the writing process. We need to teach them revising strategies on the computer in order for them to see the relationship between word processing commands and the composing process. Computer science departments may be able teach the skills equally well; but they can't demonstrate to our students how those skills facilitate writing and revising.

Shaughnessy helped us discover ways to present writing to basic writers.[10] Following her lead, we need to work together, sharing results of our efforts to find effective ways of teaching computer writing to our students. Before using computers in their classes, basic writing instructors need to understand what they are doing and how they are going to proceed. By openly discussing their concerns, teachers will have time to formulate valid strategies. Shaughnessy emphasized that there may be a connection between "the changes teachers undergo and the progress of their students."[11] Only after more experience will we be ready to "dive in" confidently, having adopted a successful pedagogy for teaching basic writing with computers, one which keeps the emphasis on writing and on the progress of the writer.

NOTES

1. Mina P. Shaughnessy, "Diving In: An Introduction to Basic Writing," College Composition and Communication, 34 (October, 1976), 234-239.

2. Andrea Lunsford, "What We Know--and Don't Know--About Remedial Writing," College Composition and Communication, 29 (February, 1978), 47-52.

3. David Bartholomae, "Teaching Basic Writing: An Alternative to Basic Skills," Journal of Basic Writing, 2 (Spring/Summer, 1979), 85-109.

4. Mike Rose, "Remedial Writing Courses: A Critique and a Proposal," College English, 45 (February, 1983), 109-128.

5. Kate Kiefer, "The Development of Computer-Assisted Instruction in Composition," and Charles R. Smith, "Writer's Workbench: Applications in the Classroom," papers presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Detroit, March, 1983.

6. William Marling, "Computer-Assisted Grading," paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Detroit, March, 1983.

7. Richard Collier, "The Word Processor and Revision Strategies," College Composition and Communication, 34 (May, 1983), 149-155.

8. Collette Daiute, "The Computer as Stylus and Audience," College Composition and Communication, 34 (May, 1983), 134-145.

9. Lewis Meyers, "Texts and Teaching: Basic Writing," College English, (April, 1978), 918-933.

10. Mina Shaughnessy, Errors and Expectations (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

11. Shaughnessy, "Diving In: An Introduction to Basic Writing," p. 238.